

Wednesday, June 7, 2006

Slow boat to success

Marshall "Duffy" Duffield's life has been a Rodney-Dangerfield-can't-get-no-respect success story. He has sold nearly 6,000 electric boats, including about 1,400 that bustle across Newport Harbor like water beetles. But he can't get a speeding ticket.

By JOHN GITTELSON
The Orange County Register

Marshall "Duffy" Duffield pilots his newest electric boat, the 22 Cutty – the first new Duffy in 10 years – onto the mercury-like waters of Newport Harbor.

As the boat quietly purrs along, he plays Jungle Cruise tour guide, telling wry tales of his company and the waters he has plied since boyhood.

Then he spies a red harbor patrol boat and grins like a little kid. Well aware of the 5 mile-per-hour speed limit, he shoves the throttle forward, giving her all she's got.

"I've always wanted to get a speeding ticket in one of these," he says.

The Duffy accelerates - to 7 mph - and the harbor patrol glides by without a passing glance, another indignity in Duffield's boating career.

For Duffield, 54, life has been a Rodney Dangerfield, can't-get-no-respect success story. He has sold nearly 6,000 electric boats, including about 1,400 that bustle across Newport Harbor like water beetles. He employs 160 people, building 500 boats a year, servicing, renting and selling them through a worldwide network of 60 dealers.

But he can't get a speeding ticket.

In the boating world, respect goes to speed and horsepower. The bathtub-like Duffys are built for comfort, floating lounges sheltered from the elements behind zip-close windows under a canvas surrey canopy, nicknamed "cocktail cruisers."

"Our tagline is: We do 5 miles an hour better than any boat," Duffield says as he navigates the harbor. "My boats were originally called Edisons" - as in Thomas Edison - "Then, they just became Duffy. Now it's like a name brand - like Band-Aid or Xerox. My name is associated with the world's slowest boat, and it's kind of hurtful."

He points out the sights. John Wayne's old home. A sloop he raced to Hawaii. Yacht clubs with his boats.

"There's the house my dad built," Duffield says as he motors by Linda Isle. "It cost about 75 grand. I sold a boat to a man who bought the place four houses up. He said he paid \$17 million."

His father, Marshall Duffield Sr., quarterbacked USC's 1930 Rose Bowl-winning team, earning the nickname "Field Marshall." He sold liquor wholesale, built golf courses and developed real estate. The father died in 1990, but the son still feels overshadowed.

"To this day, people think my dad did it," Duffield says of Duffy Electric Boat Co. "Quite the contrary. My dad helped me now and



IN NO HURRY: Marshall Duffield is inventor of the increasingly popular "cocktail cruisers," electric-powered boats known more for their comfort than their speed.

MATT EICH, THE ORANGE
COUNTY REGISTER

[MORE
PHOTOS](#)

then, but whenever I needed money, he'd give me a fraction. I'd ask for \$3,000 and he'd give me \$750. He taught me that's what you do. You don't pay the whole bill."

Friends say his father raised him right. "Duffy overcame affluenza," says Rusty Turner, 52, a childhood friend, real estate developer and neighbor. "His family was as prominent as any in Newport Beach, and he started his company from scratch. If Duffy can do it, other Newport Beach kids can do it."

Duffield grew up in a waterfront home on Bay Shore Drive, sailing, tinkering with motors, inventing. He sketched sailboats in his bedroom. He built a tank in his yard to test his models.

In the summer of 1969, before his senior year in high school, he grew frustrated with the constant breakdowns of his family's gas-powered runabout. Golf-cart engines were much more reliable, he figured, so he asked his father for \$300 to buy an old cart with an electric motor. Outside a Quonset hut his father owned on 17th Street in Costa Mesa, Duffield and his friend Jack Heiser tested the first electric boat engine.

"We had six batteries in a row and four wires, and it was a mystery how to connect them all up," says Heiser, now a consultant for the Duffy company. "If you did it wrong, the amount of energy would melt a screwdriver. It's a wonder we didn't get electrocuted."

The experiment sparked and clattered and required constant oil, Heiser says. But it worked.

Duffield began using the boat to squire girls around Newport Harbor. A few months later, an elderly man demanded to know what type of batteries powered the boat. Duffield showed him a row of Trojan Batteries and the man - who turned out to be Ray Godber, president of the Trojan Battery Co. - ordered his wife to get the checkbook.

"I don't make them for sale," Duffield recalls saying.

"You do now," Godber replied.

Duffield made the Duffys for money, but built racing sailboats for love. His skin bears wrinkles and patches from too much sun, wind and salt. He crewed on some of sailing's most prestigious races: the Trans-Pacific, Congressional Cup and 1980 America's Cup.

In his 20s, he assembled a syndicate that built Native Son, a 50-foot sloop he designed that finished fast in the Trans-Pac but was penalized for failing to conform to official design standards.

"He was like a mad professor," says Dennis Durgan, a boyhood friend who crewed with Duffy. "He's a very good practical engineer, but he never studied the rules."

To Duffield's chagrin, Newport's boating crowd cared less about his sailing exploits than his cruisers.

"It was embarrassing to make the boat with the surrey on top," he says. "I'm a macho guy. But people said, 'It's cute, cute, cute.' It would make the payroll. Some lady would seek me out, and I'd be rude and arrogant and long-haired and they'd find me and want one."

That slow boat has spawned a harbor subculture.

"The purpose is to get out of your car, get off your Blackberry, take time out from your busy life, have a Mai Tai and go for a cruise," says Thaddeus Benshoof, 35, a Costa Mesa marketing executive who recently ordered a new Duffy. "If you're going to drink and drive - not that I'm endorsing it - where better than a golf cart on the water?"

Duffield worked hard to build a business that makes a product designed for kicking back. He used to drop the electric boats off on the docks of interested customers, leave the keys and ride a bicycle home. He outgrew the 17th Street Quonset hut, outgrew a nearby factory and grew too big for Orange County. In 1999, he moved to Adelanto in the Mojave Desert, because he couldn't get a permit from the South Coast Air Quality Management District, due to pollution from fiberglass hulls.

"The irony is what I made is what the AQMD wants - electric boats," he says. "I'm like, 'Guys, I'm confused. How can we clean up the air without products to clean up the air?' There aren't credits for people who make things that don't pollute."

He won't disclose how much money he earns, but it's enough to make payroll, send his two oldest kids to USC and enjoy life on the water.

Economics are going his way. It costs less than \$1 worth of electricity to charge a Duffy for a 10-hour harbor cruise. Gas costs \$4 a gallon on the Newport docks, he notes, and more than \$5 in Catalina.

"If it hits \$10 a gallon," he says, "maybe people will think about slowing down."

CONTACT US: 714-796-7969 or jgittels@ocregister.com

[PRINT ARTICLE](#)

[E-MAIL ARTICLE](#)